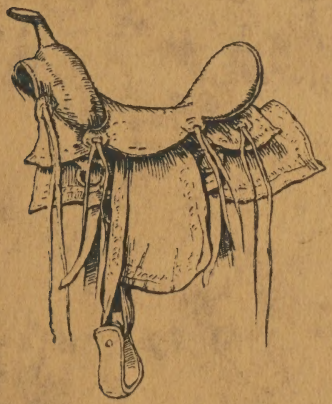
THE RANCH

ELLIOTT C. LINCOLN



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THE RANCH

THE RANCH

Poems of the West

BY

ELLIOTT C. LINCOLN

Author of "Rhymes of a Homesteader"

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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THE RANCH

THE JUNE TRAIL

Kree-e-kuh, chuck-a,
Kree-e-kuh, chuck-a,
Shufflin' hoofs an' saddle leather
Kinder seem to blend together
In a sleepy little tune.
Pinto hawse, pinto hawse,
Ain't yo' glad the summer weather
Promises to stay a while?
Ain't yo' glad it's June?

Kree-e-kuh, chuck-a,
Kree-e-kuh, chuck-a,
What's the use of runnin' races
When the growin' sagebrush traces
Brighter patterns on the hill?
"Take yo' time, take yo' time,"
Call the smilin' sunflower faces
Noddin' lazy by the road,
"Time wus made to kill."

Kree-e-kuh, chuck-a,
Kree-e-kuh, chuck-a,
Oh, it's good to be a-ridin'
On through June, without decidin'
Anythin' — jest trustin' luck.
Pinto hawse, pinto hawse,
Don't yo' look to me for guidin'
When yo' hear the saddle sing
"*Kree-e-kuh, chuck-a, chuck.*"

THE GIRL OF THE LONELINESS

Far from the travelled roads of men our dim
trails wind away:
Through the cold, thin silence of hills we go,
we watch the shimmering desert flow,
By the nameless streams our campfires glow
when the evening mists rise gray.

And we, the wanderers, journey alone as the
months and the years drift by.
Sons of old Ishmael, unafraid, pledged men
sworn to the love of a maid,
To the Girl of the Loneliness we have paid the
vows that hold till we die.

To me she comes in a silver song of jingling
bit and spur;
Through sunny weather, and cold star-shine,
and pitch-black nights when storm
winds whine,
I have felt the touch of her knee on mine, as I
rode the trail with her.

And her low sweet laughter gladdens me like
the sound of a stream in spring,
And the silken folds of her kerchief float
caressingly at her warm, white throat,
And the light in her grave eyes echoes the note
of her lips' soft welcoming.

Out from the waste lands of the earth we sun-
burned men come back
With never a word of her winsome face, and
tarry a while, and then retrace
Our eager ways to a trysting-place far off
from the trodden track.

She is older than history, younger than dawn;
she is loyal, and brave, and gay.
She has brightened the trail for a million men,
the stern, unshaven, homeless men,
Those rugged, useless, wandering men who
travel the lonely way.

GRAY BUTTE

Thick brush and fallen timber blocked the way
  Up to the citadel, but there the pines
Broke on the rocky walls in disarray,
  And up above their ragged skirmish lines
Was a great boundlessness of brilliant day.

It caught my throat, that bright immensity
  Of sunny lands beyond a forest ring,
Wide-rolling plains, and blue peaks rising high.
  I looked above, and saw an eagle swing
A long, slow circle on a polished sky.

It was so quiet there, so very still,
  That I could hear the humming of the bees,
The booming of a dove below the hill,
  Each little wind that crept among the trees;
And once I heard a single goldfinch trill.

Out from his den a fat old woodchuck came,
  And found a sunny place upon a rock,

And stretched himself there; and I did the same,
And watched the day with him till eight o'clock,
When the flat sun rolled down in silent flame.

And now, whenever things go very wrong,
I like to think of Gray Butte, standing there
Above the pine tops, dreaming to the song
Of wings and winds, warm in the sun-washed air,
Age-old and lonely, calm, and gray, and strong.

VISITIN'

I kin stand my own relations, an' my wife's
relations, too,
An' I claim to love my neighbor like a man
had ought to do,
But all the week I feel a crushin' weight;
It's a-comin' on me jest as sure as fate,
An' mornin', noon, an' evenin' life is equal
desolate,
'Cause I got to go a-visitin' on Sunday.

Once I kinder thought o' Sunday as the day I
liked the best,
When a man could shuck his collar an' his
shoes, an' take a rest,
Jest loaf around the house, an' eat, an'
snore.
But I can't do that sort o' thing no more,
'Cause Minnie gives her orders on the Satur-
day before;
"Better ketch that drivin' team, tomor-
row's Sunday."

Well, I reckon Minnie likes it, but the good
Lord only knows
How I hate a pinchin' collar, an' them stuffy,
scratchy clothes
That stick so to a red-hot buggy seat,
When a feller's drivin' through the dust an'
heat,
An' every mile seems long enough to make the
trip complete,
Goin' up to May an' Henry's on a Sunday.

But they say they're glad to see us, which I
sure do hope is true,
An' the rockin'-chairs git rockin' to the tune
of "Well, I *knew*
Jim Holmes's wife might leave him any
day."
But me an' Hen, we don't find much to
say.
It's natural fer women, but it ain't us fellers'
way,
An' especially it ain't, on a Sunday.

Hen, he says the gray mare's fistula is pretty
nearly well,

An' I tell about the binder that I'd kinder like to sell:
Right there the conversation seems to quit.
There ain't another thing to do but *sit.*
Jest sit an' smoke, an' wonder — when the yellin' kids permit —
Why the clocks run slow on a Sunday.

By an' by it's time fer dinner, an' I eat enough fer three,
An' then we go an' sit some more, till Minnie says to me,
"Well, Sam, I kinder guess we orter go."
It sounds good, but it don't mean nothin' though,
An' I don't git much excited fer an hour, 'cause I know
It ain't polite to hurry home on Sunday.

Sorter wonder why I stand it? Well, you certain' don't know Min!
But the worm is gittin' ready, an' I reckon he'll begin
His turnin' jest about next Friday night.

But it don't look good fer married folks to
fight.
I'll jest plain fade off up the hill an' high-tail
outer sight,
An' I won't be back a-tall till Monday.

REWARD OFFERED

None of us folks on Antelope Flat
Is rich, but we jest sent round the hat,
An' we've set a price on some one's head:
We'd like him alive, but we'll take him dead.

"Now, sasshay all!" shouts Handsome Bill
As he puts an end to the plain quadrille,
An' the little feet patter while the big feet
stamp,
Till the flame shoots high in every lamp
An' the dust rolls up from the schoolhouse
floor.

You never seen such a crowd before
At an N-Bar dance. We all was there;
Gents in collars an' slicked down hair —
Some of us steppin' kinder wide —
Girls rigged out like sinful pride,
Gran'pas, gra'mmas, single ladies,
Married folks with year-old babies;
Every free, white, livin' soul
From Frenchman's Ford to the Devil's Hole

Was packed in the schoolhouse hall that night,
To greet the new year proper an' right.

An' so we rush for a chance to sit
An' fan, an' mop, an' rest a bit,
'Cause a quadrille called by Handsome Bill
Ain't no place for the crippled or ill,
Or the man with a home-made darn in his sock.
But it's gettin' on towards twelve o'clock,
An' Bill, he raps on a fiddle case
Till we quiets down all round the place
An' gives attention.

"Folks," says he,
"Ladies or gents, as the case may be,
That magic hour is drawin' near
When we slips right into a bran-new year
For better or worse. We're goin' to start
The midnight waltz. Jest do your part
An' make her the dance we'll all remember
Clean to the end of next December.
Now, gents, listen! When I yells 'Change,'
Each feller start for a different range

An' rope the first stray heifer he meets.
Next time I yell he jest repeats;
But when I calls out 'Happy New Year,'
Then every game gent dancin' here
He'll kiss his partner. What d'you say!"

Unanimous we shouts "hurray,"
Except for the girls, an' they jest wriggle
An' squirm in their chairs, an' blush, an' giggle,
An' whisper things. It sure did seem
Like nothin' was wrong with Handsome's scheme.
But when them fiddles start to sound
Each feller sneaks one look around,
An' all them looks hit common ground!

She warn't no native sister, sure.
The sun ain't had no chance to cure
Her hide, like most on Antelope Flat.
She warn't jest thin, she warn't jest fat,
But somewheres in between the two.
Her eyes was big, an' baby blue,
An' somethin' in 'em seemed to say,
"Come on, please mister, come an' play."

An' folks ain't certain who had brought her:
Some says she's Don Fletcher's daughter
Home from school, an' then there's others
Think she come with Arley Crothers.
Some says she rid out from town
With one of the fiddlers, name of Brown.
Fact of the matter is, none of us knows.

But it's quarter to twelve. Our frolicsome toes
Is skippin' around to the *one-two-three-one*
Of good ol' *Blue Danube*. Say, talk about fun
When the first change is called, an' we each swaps our girl
For a new one, an' steps out our best, in the whirl
Of couples whose laughin' gets higher an' higher,
As we watches the long hand creep nigher an' nigher
To the top of the clock. But we does it again
Without no confusion. Then somehow the strain
Gets too much for manners, an' looks that ain't lovin'

Is swapped right industrious. Fellers start
shovin',
An' all in a minute we're millin' up tight
In a corner. A lady flops over with fright.
An' the hub of the millin', you'll maybe
surmise,
Was the cute little stranger with baby
blue eyes!

The waltz breaks off sudden. One gent
kicks another.
Jim Taggert slugs the sheriff's brother
An' he swings back. A coat goes flyin'
Overhead. The girls start cryin'.
Gee, she busted twenty ways
To once! An' then it's jest a haze
Of feet, an' fists, an' tearin' clothes,
Where each gent does the best he knows
To help things on, an' every minute
More an' more is mixin' in it.
Leavin' sweethearts, leavin' wives,
Joyous we all arrives.
Even poor ol' Cap McKay,
Eighty years, if he's a day,
Come a-limpin' to the fray

An' swung his crutch promiscuous.
It sure was one grand, glorious fuss
Till all the lamps went out. — 'Twarn't right!
Some woman done that out of spite —.

Then, when the hall was dark, an' we
Was feelin' round resentfully,
That stranger girl, she snuck away
With Bill — an' it was New Year's Day.

MAIL DAY

I

There's a bow-legged boy with his shoulders swinging,
Riding in to town to get the mail,
Loping through the dust, with a meadowlark singing
Happy little greetings by the trail.
And it's June weather, and the sun shines bright,
And the creak of leather is a keen delight;
So he laughs at the curlew's startled flight,
And the green hills echo his hail.

At the Silver Dollar there's a welcome ready,
Cooling things to cut the alkali;
Friendly little game with his old pal, Eddie,
Helps to keep the minutes on the fly.
But the day is shading into afternoon,
And the hills are fading all too soon,
And he rides by the stars and a pale new moon
When he turns toward home with a sigh.

II

Down in the coulee a woman waits,
A dull-eyed girl with rough, red hands,
And hair drawn back in ragged plaits.
The bare hills fold their leaden bands
North, and south, and east, and west.
The trail gleams empty, far away.
Her thin lips quiver, close compressed,
For the mail from home is due today.

THE CRAFTSMAN

He fashioned canes from diamond-willow
wood
Through the dull summer while he herded
sheep,
The slow blade shaving here, there cutting
deep
With old-world artistry. He'd spend an
hour,
Sometimes, to get the petal of a flower
To curl just right, so he might call it good.

A hundred shepherd dogs were carved on one,
In every posture that a dog can take.
Another bore a cold-eyed rattlesnake,
Jaws open, and fangs showing; on a third,
In full stampede, a terror-driven herd;
A fourth with yucca blooms, and he was
done.

But after all, they lacked utility:
And now they're lying in old harness sheds,

THE RANCH

Among the rubbish under bunk house beds —
Where useless things collect, and gather dust.
He doesn't care: he knows it's only just
A cane should be what it pretends to be.

Yet when the June days come, and summer flaunts
Her bright sun-banners over all the land,
He'll hunt the wagon's shade, and feel his hand
Thrill to the impulse of an old desire.
He'll know again the white, creative fire,
And carve more willow canes that no one wants.

AFTERMATH

"Kill me? I tell you, dad, I'd rather die
Than crawl around on sticks year after year!
We're ridin' folks. I'm not afraid of Dan.
Why, even mother had to laugh, last night,
At your suggestin' I could have old Bess.
Here, hold my crutches, dad, an' watch us go."

Slowly the Old Man nodded, gray-faced, grim:
"I guess you've got to do it. Good luck, Joe."
And took the crutches.

Then we led up Blue Dan,
Sweat-streaked on loin and shoulder, shivering,
The outlaw roan that none of us could ride
Until Joe broke him just before the War;
Taught him the cattle game, and gentled him,
Made him a one-man horse. And then Joe left
For training camp, and Dan had run to grass
Almost three years. Only two days ago
We'd saddled him and tried to ride him out.

No luck! He spilled us just as sweet and clean
As though he'd never felt a cinch in all his life.

We held his head now, till Joe clamped his hands
Around the horn, swung his good leg across,
Caught by the stump, clung, and took the reins.

"Let go, boys!" and we saw the blue-roan crouch,
Saw the wet muscles knot for one great bound
To break and kill this thing upon his back.
And then Joe spoke again: "Steady there, Dan.
Go easy, kid. Take all the time you want."

Five — ten — the seconds passed. Afraid to move,
Afraid to breathe, almost afraid to think,
We watched the miracle; saw flattened ears
Prick forward, and the fine head slowly turn
To nose the rider's foot. Round the corral,
Sensing the message of a slackened rein,
The blue-roan tiptoed, questioning the cause

AFTERMATH

Of all this baby work; as carefully
As if the sun-baked earth were rotten ice, —
A velvet pace without a slip or jar.
Then out they went through the wide open gate
Into the bright, warm hills, adventuring.

And every day since then they get the mail —
Two long hours for the seven miles to town —
Holding the same slow, gentle, easy walk
That wouldn't crack an egg. By God, it's hard
Never to feel the sweep of winds in your face,
Nor the lift of a running stride, nor the splendid thrill
Of good stiff horse work, in where the rocks are rough.
It's hard for young things.

Well, that's why we run
To open gates, and those of us who know
Give them our best old over-seas salute,
That's half for Joe, and, maybe, half for Dan.

ADVENTURE

The wind blew warm last night, and tempted me
Out from the town; a jocund wind it was,
Playing at April here in late October,
Smelling of sage, new earth, and swollen creeks.
It caught me by the coat and laughed at me
Till I played, too.

I crossed the railroad tracks,
Left stubble fields behind, and reached the hills
Just where the stage road used to angle over.
You'd hardly know it now, gutted by rain,
Thick grown with tar-weed and the rusty blooms
Of frost-nipped sunflowers — only the wrinkled ghost
Of an old highway — but it took me back
Ten years — or is it twenty? in a flash,
And led me breathless up old Sure-enough
To see the sunset from the level top.

ADVENTURE

Do you remember how we watched together
Night after night, while all that storm of glory
Flamed on the Moccasins? how, far away,
Square Butte, within the sunset's very heart,
Rode on the glowing waves of mystery
Like some great galleon rolling to the west?
What dreams were ours! What mighty deeds were planned
For gay tomorrows, rich with venturings!

The singing days, do you remember them?
The countless trails we followed, eager-eyed,
Lured by the age-old quest for what might be
Around that turn, in that rock coulee's depths,
Over the next divide? The sun-swept days
Of riding knee to knee, kin to the wind,
Kin to the gray hawk circling overhead,
Kin to the deer, that fleeing our approach
Paused in hot wonder, gazed, and bounded on.
We sought adventure through the magic hours;
Looked to the west, and said our little creed:
"Tomorrow it will come." We never knew
Each day was fine adventure in itself.
How could we know?

Soon, now, the hurrying years
Will bring us to the borders of the range,
And as we turn some spur of weathered rock,
Leaving behind old landmarks and old trails,
A strange, bright valley swinging to the hills
May call to further quest. But even then,
Facing the Great Adventure of them all,
I wonder — shall we know?

THE DRUMMER

Ol' Reb Jones had a house on the hill,
A one-room cabin with a log doorsill,
An' he kep' to himself, like an ol' bach will,
So folks thought Reb was queer.
But he sorter took a shine to me an' Jack, —
We was jest kids, then — an' his funny little shack
Was a nice place to visit in when work went slack;
We didn't have no fear.

There warn't a thing Reb couldn't do,
If half of the stories that he told was true;
Anyway, we believed him, so would you,
If you ever heard him rattle on a drum.
Reveille an' quickstep, colors, an' retreat,
He'd rattle 'em out till you felt your feet
Start knockin' on the sides of your cracker-box seat,
An' the cold shivers start to come.

He'd fought through the war as a drummer,
he said;
At Gettysburg he was left for dead.
When Pickett's lines met the Northern lead
Reb's own drum sounded the charge.
So one of the games we kids would play
Was answerin' to mess call. Dad's ranch lay
Jest down in the hollow; we'd slip away, —
Our appetites was large.

Well, the years went rollin' by, till we
Was clean grown up, but ol' Reb, he
Staid the same funny feller as he used to be,
Somehow scratchin' along.
An' then one winter night come round,
With a big cold moon, an' snow on the ground,
An' sudden we heard Reb's "rally" sound,
An' Jack says, "Somethin' 's wrong!"

We grabbed up a light, an' we started on the
run:
The up-hill climb through the woods warn't
fun,
But we stuck right to it till the job was done,
An' we seen Reb waitin' there.

THE DRUMMER

With his shoulders level, an' his chin held high,
An' his ol' flannel nightshirt blowin' all awry,
He was watchin' the trees with an anxious eye,
While his drum still battered the air.

Then he shifted to the charge, with all his might,
As he heard us shout through the frosty night,
But the flyin' sticks faltered when he seen our light,
An' he yells out, "Men, you're slow!
Forrud the Sixty-Ninth! Up on the line! —
All right, Cap, jest give us the sign."
Then he spun half round in the cold moonshine,
An' he dropped down, dead, in the snow.

But that was years ago.

Tonight the pine trees sway and sing.
The ranch house shakes, and cold winds bring
Strange sounds. The faint, far echoes come
Like the roll of a Civil War drum.

THE BLIZZARD

Down the land between the ranges there's a
mighty wind blowing,
Laden thick with whirling snow, blotting
out the sky,
Veiling white the barren world beyond all
knowing,
Hissing through the willows where the dead
streams lie.

Gray in the welter come the ghost-herds
drifting,
Massing on the line fence, fading in the
sage.
Now their trail is levelled by the quick, cold
sifting;
Over bench and coulee sweeps the north
wind's rage.

White death on frozen wings battering the
world's face!
Puny life trembles in its weariness and fear.

THE BLIZZARD

Only the window of a man-child's dwelling
place
Flaunts unbeaten challenge where his lamp
shines clear.

THE MEADOWLARK

Howdy, Mister Meadowlark!
  Kinder *like* the mornin', don't you?
Where you been this tough ol' winter?
  Hey there, tell a feller, won't you?

Where'd you get that sporty coat,
  An' that shiny yeller collar?
Bet the new black tie you're wearin'
  Cost you pretty nigh a dollar.

Sing, you fat ol' rascal, sing!
  Pipe her up now, good an' plenty!
That there bubbly thing you're trillin'
  Takes me back when I wus twenty.

Well, s'long, you Meadowlark;
  Me, I've heard the springtime callin'.
Reckon my ol' drills an' harrers
  Need a right good overhaulin'.

RIDING WEATHER

Sing if you want to, nobody minds.
Drink your fill of the earth-sweet air.
Play you're a god who rules creation;
Laugh out loud at your dreams of care.

Days like this were made for riding,
Never a cloud in the morning sky.
Bright winds ruffle the sage to silver,
Calling *Follow*, as they pass by.

Hoof-beats drumming across the prairie,
All the east in a flaming fire,
Cinches tight, and the world before us:
Pray, what more could a man desire?

TWO HOUSES

At night an ancient house where men have
died
Oppresses me. I fear the shrouding gloom
That fluctuates within a darkened room
When old floors creak, and sounds are magni-
fied.
I fear the fluid shadow-things that glide,
Formless and silent as impending doom
About my bed. The place becomes a tomb
Wherein I crouch, and wait, and cannot hide.
But in the very oldest house I know
The midnight hour brings no thought of fear,
Because the open sky is all aglow
With friendly stars, and all the sounds I hear
Are friendly sounds. The pine trees whisper
low,
"Out in the open God is very near."

PARADISE TRAIL

Wildflower blooms of myriad dyes
  Border the way on Paradise Trail,
Over our heads glow the summer skies,
  Down from the hills the white clouds sail;
Why do we laugh when our glances meet?
Love is riding, and life is sweet.

Life? It's a gift for lovers who ride!
  (Proudly the black horse strives with the
    bay)
Even the free winds ranging wide
  Envy our careless youth today.
Hark, can you hear what they bid us dare,
Girl of sunlight and blowing hair?

Down by the ford tall cottonwoods grow,
  Lacing the trail with their sequined shade;
Here, where the stream is singing low,
  Is a place of rest for a man and a maid.
Yonder the trail lies, a faint, thin gleam,
Far ahead, where the great hills dream.

"Oh, but the wind sweeps bitterly cold
There in the hills when summer is dead."
Thus they have warned us, they who are old.
"Failure and death are there," they said:
"Winter winds bury the trail in snow.
Dark are the gorges then, *we* know."

Mount again, sweetheart! quick! and ride
Now while the sun shines warm on the plain
Sing to the beat of the bay's quick stride,
Bury your hands in his tossing mane!
What should we fear from the winter gale?
Love rides with us on Paradise Trail.

THE CONTEST RIDER

With slouching ease he strolls before the stands,
Thin waisted, broad of shoulder, keen of face,
Embarrassed by the shout his skill commands,
Elated at the chance of winning place.
He plays his rough game now where all can see:
"Joe Blake on Thunder. Watch chute number three!"

WAITING

That steak'll be like leather in a minute.
I wish he'd come: he said he'd sure be home
In time for supper, but it's half-past six
An' no Jim yet. Oh well, I might 'a' known it.
Killin' myself to get his meals on time,
An' not a once — except, o' course, for breakfast —
But everythin' got cold before he et.
Just fix a little piece of fence, he said,
Down by the spring. The short way home from there
Is up the crick trail. Guess I'll go an' look.

There's nothin' this side of the bridge, that's sure,
An' nothin' to the hay corral. The bend?
There's somethin' white there, an' it's movin', too —
I put his gray shirt in the wash this mornin' —
It must be him! I'll get the glasses —

No,
Oh no, it ain't. It's just a white-face calf
Goin' to water. Guess I'd better eat.
I wish he'd get a dog.

'Most half-past eight —
I'm glad the moon's up.

Listen! Seems to me
The gate squeaked. Yes, an' there's old
Randy's nicker!
He don't forget he's got a home, but Jim,
A lot Jim cares. Suppose he'll want his sup-
per.
Well, all the supper that he'll get tonight
He'll rustle up himself. He's got to learn.

That's funny, Randy's nickerin' again.
Wonder what keeps 'em. Sounded like they'd
stopped
Down at the gate. Maybe I'd better go —
Perhaps they're bringin' home a calf or some-
thin'.
Where's my coat?

'Tis Randy. Jim! oh Jim!
I wonder — why — why — *why!* This stirrup's smashed
And Randy's mud clean up the side! *Where's* Jim?
One rein broke, too. He must be hurt! Oh Lord
Why don't he get a horse a girl can ride!
He's maybe —

Steady Randy, — whoa there now —
I've got to do it! — Whoa there, whoa, you beast!
Damn you — oh damn you!

No use, he won't stand.

I'd start an' walk, but out there in the hills
I'd never find him, not in fifty years.
An' then if Jim came home an' found me gone
He'd worry. Seems to me I'd better go
Back to the house.

There's that clock strikin' ten!
Just one more look, an' then I'll go to bed.
Wish I could sleep.

WAITING

No, nothin' comin' yet.
How bright it is! Hear the fool coyotes!
It's always cold here nights, even in summer.

Listen! What's that? Somethin' — or some
one's — comin'
On the old road down by the chicken house.
There 'tis again! He wouldn't come that
way —
Why should he?

Look! I see it now! I see him!
Limpin' — he's hurt — but —

Jim! I'm comin'! Jim!
Wait there!

Oh sweet, good, dear, kind God,
it's Jim!

JOB, 39: 18

(What time she lifteth up herself on high,
she scorneth the horse and his rider.)

Lemuel Keno Birch, that's him
  Ploddin' along out there in the dust
With his head hung down. A she girl's whim
  It set him afoot, an' his heart went bust.

Lem, the ridin'est son-of-a-gun
  That ever straddled a range-bred colt
Or a squealin' outlaw — well, he's done,
  He's a walkin' man till the angels moult.

* * *

Us fellers that worked at the Flyin' A
  Was willin' to take our oath,
An' own right up to it, proud an' free,
Lem Birch was the best that ever we see,
  Fer women an' horses both.

His own pet black, that he rode to town
  On his monthly pay-day toot,
Was standard bred, an' his best girl, Nell,
Was the lookin'-queen of the Musselshell,
  An' the boss's daughter to boot.

An' the only trouble with Nig, the hawse,
Was, nobody knowed what he'd do;
An' the only trouble with Nell, the fair, —
Well, speakin' plain, she had red hair,
An' a temper to match it, too.

But Lem, he's a-gettin' along right fine
Until one day in the spring
When the meaderlarks was chirpin' love —
Or so he thought — an' the sky above
Was blue as a bluebird's wing.

Then Nell, she says, with her nicest smile,
"Say, Lem, I'm a-goin' to town,
'Cause the Baptis' ladies is givin' a feed,
An' I sorter said — fact is, I agreed
Fer to help 'em to pass things roun'.

"But Dad, he's busy, an' Goldie's lame,
So I jest gotter borrow a hawse.
Could you lend me Nig?" Lem, he gets hot
An' picks at his collar, an' sweats a lot,
An', stutterin', says, "O' course

"He's never been rid by a lady none,
An' he might be sorter mean;

But he knows the road, an' he orter do
His level best fer a girl like you —
  The prettiest ever I seen!"

So Nell, she does like a lady should
  Till both of 'em lose their breath.
An' then she saddles, an' rides away,
While Lem, he picks fer the weddin' day
  Sunday, June twentieth.

Come noon, there ain't much farther to go,
  An' Nell lopes happy along
Till she turns into Main Street, head in air,
Right tickled at making the town folks stare,
  When sudden — things busted wrong!

Fer the hitchin'-rack at the Mint Saloon
  Was home, sweet home, to Nig;
An' seein' she aims fer to pass it by,
He stops right short, gives a grunt, an' a sigh,
  Then spins like a whirligig.

He makes three jumps to his usual place
  Right next to the door, an' stops.
Jest shuts his eyes, an' humps his back,

With his nose glued tight to the hitchin'-
rack,
Till blazin' hell sure pops!

She fans him up, an' she fans him down,
She scratches him plenty an' free,
But every time, when the dust cloud clears,
He's a-standin', hunched, with pinned-back
ears;
So the crowd comes runnin' to see.

Nell, she gets redder, an' redder yet,
Till her face most matches her hair,
But findin' he wouldn't budge that day
She jest climbs down an' stomps away,
An' leaves him standin' there.

Now, jest what happened I never quite
knowed,
But subsequent I hear tell
That Lem, when he loses his chance fer a
wife,
Swears off from hawses the rest of his life,
An' from female girls as well.

* * *

Young man, when you plan them sprees, jest think
Of the fate that lit on Lem K. Birch:
Don't make no odds where you take your drink,
But hitch your hawse by the Baptis' church.

WIRELESS

This "miracle of wireless" stuff
  It makes me kinder sick,
An' folks that wonder at it much
  They sure is lunatic:
Jane Beasley knows things jest as soon
  An' spreads 'em jest as quick.

Before the crowd gets home she knows
  Who danced with who, an' why;
She knows who held the winnin' flush,
  Whose throat was extra dry.
She knew Jef's kid had broke his leg
  Before Jef heard him cry.

That rainy night Buck Jones eloped
  I seen him take the train
With Mabel, an' I thinks for once
  I'm goin' to startle Jane.
I run my cayuse seven mile —
  An' met her in the lane.

Says I, "Buck Jones an' Mabel Flint — "
  Says she, "O' course, I know.
She wore her pearl gray duvetyne
  That always wrinkled so.
I hear she took the silver spoons!
  Hed up, — I got to go."

An' so, I ask you, what's the use
  Of puttin' out good cash
On wireless receivin' sets,
  An' such newfangled trash?
A willin' neighbor, goin' good,
  Can beat 'em all to smash.

CHARITY

The very nicest way I know
To give my soul a splendid treat
Is handing out a dime or so
To some poor beggar on the street.

I like to feel the kindly thrill
A virtuous action always brings.
I like to feel it spread until
My generous heart just throbs and sings.

How pleasant it would be if I
Could have a beggar all my own,
And bind him close with every tie
Of gratitude to me alone.

My self-esteem would grow and grow,
To hear him saying thanks to me
For every dime. I love to show
My selfish generosity.

MEET MY FRIEND

I've such an awful lot of friends
  Who seem to think a fellow should
Be mighty grateful when he hears
  Unpleasant truths for his own good!

I sort of think I'd like just one
  To flatter me with pleasant lies;
To help me keep my self-respect,
  And never, never criticize.

He'd find my weaknesses and faults
  Were really virtues shining through,
And his advice would always be
  The very thing I'd planned to do.

He'd see in me the perfect blend
  Of movie-hero, sage, and saint:
In fact he'd see me as the man
  I'd really like to be — but ain't.

SOME HAWSE

(Being Uncle Dan O'Hara's reaction to certain accounts on the sporting page of the *Star*.)

That Man-o'-war, he's a runnin' fool
  Accordin' to most accounts,
An' the best of 'em all has et his dust
  In frequent an' large amounts
Whenever he started to stretch hisself:
  I sure would admire to see
What a high-priced hawse like him kin do
  In good fast company.
But shucks, you can't most gener'ly tell —
  Now, jest fer to git a line,
I'd like to stack him up agin
  This bald-faced bay o' mine.

Baldy, he's gittin' kinder stiff,
  But when he wus comin' four
They warn't no hawse on the Musselshell
  Could touch him, an' furthermore
He wus all'us willin' to do his best
  If I let him out. Why, say,

They wus lots of times, when I headed fer
home,
An' it warn't too sunny a day,
That his shadder jest couldn't keep up with
him,
An' he'd fuss, till he seen his mate
Come slidin' into the pole corral
Close on to a minute late.

But Baldy, he ain't the fastest hawse
That ever I owned, hell no!
'Cause me an' Jim Pierce, we wus combin' the
hills
Some twenty-odd years ago —
The spring when Jim wus runnin' his bunch
Jest south o' the big divide —
An' I got my rope on a sorrel hawse
That I sure did plan fer to ride.
So we saddled him there in the little draw
To the west o' Carter's Butte —
Where the Circle-Bar's got a sheep-shed now —
An' I clumb aboard right cute.

No sir, he never bucked a-tall,
But he run like — like — well, he run!

SOME HAWSE

An' I saws his mouth till my arms give out,
  But that don't bother him none.
So I steers him roun' an' roun' the butte,
  An' the secon' time roun' — it's a fac' —
I seen, through a cloud o' rollin' dust,
  Right straight ahead, my back
All scrunched down low an' ridin' its best,
  But we wus a-gainin' steady:
I sure wus scairt, an' I kicked both feet
  From the stirrups, an' got me ready.

An' when, on the seventh or eighth time roun',
  He stepped on his hocks an' fell,
I jest rolled clear: 'course it shook me some,
  But the sorrel — I hate to tell
What happened to him! His off hin' leg
  Wus cut clean down to the bone.
Well, there warn't no help, though I'm free to
    state
  That I wisht it'd been my own
When I seen him kickin' about in the sage,
  Where his racin' blood wus drainin'.
So I had to shoot him. Gosh, I wus sore!
  He'd 'a' made some hawse, with trainin'.

CHUCK BAKER

It ain't what some folks call a treat
  T' hear Chuck Baker sing;
He jest plain opens up his mouth
  An' lets her come, a string
Of mighty sounds that make the air
  Start quiverin' with surprise,
An' coyotes scuttle for their holes,
  An' cow-hands wipe their eyes.

But Chuck's our local ornament
  On which we looks with pride,
'Cause he ain't built like common folks:
  Dog-gone his onery hide
The happier his singin' sounds
  The worse we knows he's feelin',
An' visa versa, so to speak,
  When mournful strains come pealin'.

T' meet him bawlin' to the stars
  How Heaven is his home,
An' bein' but a stranger here
  He's willin' for to roam,

CHUCK BAKER

You'd never guess them doleful yells
  Was only meant to state
He jest swapped off his locoed mare
  An' aimed to celebrate.

But times when banks is callin' loans
  An' steers is sellin' low,
Or some one's held a pair of kings
  When all Chuck had to show
Was eight-spots, why he's sure to start
  Some red-eyed round-up song,
With words to make a squaw-man blush,
  An' chorus double strong.

He says it keeps him balanced up
  The same way smokin' acts,
'Cause when folks git to soarin' high
  Hymns hold 'em down to facts;
An' when they're sad, a rough, tough song
  Chuck claims it helps a sight.
Well, I dunno. I ain't so sure
  But maybe Chuck, he's right.

OMENS

I'd been a-settin' up with Lou
For quite a spell — a nice girl, too —
An' little birds was singin' in my head
As I rid home.
The rain, the mud, the twenty miles
Was shinin' with her angel smiles;
Seemed like I sure had reached the time
to wed,
An' never roam.

Right then there come two buggies past,
A-splashin' through the mud so fast
I ain't got time to rekernize the teams,
Or yell hello,
But I hear sounds a-comin' out
From each of 'em: there warn't no doubt
As folks had stretched their tempers to
extremes,
An' let 'em go.

Words come like women folks was peeved,
Disgraced, deserted, an' deceived,

OMENS

An' not a mite uncertain who to blame,
  Or what to say;
An' likewise come a steady moan,
A droopin', hopeless undertone
Like weary men explainin', dyin' game,
  But on their way.

It's kinder awful not to know
What got them ladies scrappin' so:
The dog-gone thing has worried me, by spells,
  For years an' years.
But I ain't blind to omens none,
Nor I don't buck 'em jest for fun:
I shifts my thoughts from chimin' weddin' bells
  To raisin' steers.

"INTERESTING PEOPLE"

I'm off them up-lift magazines,
The hopeful, sunny, helpful kind,
For good an' all — an' then some more —
They've sure disturbed my trustin' mind.

I sorter liked the darn things once;
I'm even sayin' it was fun
To read about the self-made men
An' all the wonders they had done.

But when I think about the guy
That sells tame angle worms for bait
An' clears six thousand bucks each year
To show he's master of his fate,

Or simple, kindly ol' Mis' Blinks —
She understands the native speech
Of dickey birds an' wrens an' such,
An' spends her winters at Palm Beach —

Or that there little kid, age ten,
Who seined his daddy's wheat for hoppers,

An' sold 'em, dried, for chicken feed,
An' now controls United Coppers,

Why, when I think it's maybe true
The things I read about them folks
My self-respect jest curls its tail,
Rolls over on its back, and croaks.

But ol' King Brady, Jesse James,
An' Di'mund Dick, who never fails,
I jest eat up. Y' see I know
The things they done is fairy tales.

THE SCHOOLMA'AM

Almost every sort o' lady has been written up in rhyme,
Some wus beautiful an' good, an' some wus — not.
But I never heard no poet feller make his jew's-harp chime
Fer a schoolma'am, so I guess I'll take a shot.

When this land wus mostly sagebrush, rattlesnakes, an' alkali,
With the ranches scattered pretty far apart,
Then the little distric' schoolma'am sorter cocked her knowin' eye,
Put a clean shirt in her grip, an' made a start.

First she had us build a schoolhouse, an' we set it up on skids
'Cause our population shifted over night,
Then she combed the country careful fer the families with kids,
An' she cinched 'em with a contrac', good an' tight.

THE SCHOOLMA'AM

Say, she kep' them kids a-learnin'! never
missed a single day,
Did her fifteen mile o' ridin', rain or shine,
On a limpin', bony cayuse that a sheep-man
give away;
You could hear her bell a-ringin' prompt at
nine.

Then the single fellers got to washin' 'way
behin' their ears,
An' a-slickin' up their heads, all nice an'
wet.
An' them that couldn't git along without the
cup that cheers
Started hittin' up the *eau de violet.*

Well, some of her, they married us, an' others
jest plain harried us —
We ain't decided yet which kind wus best.
But all of 'em wus good fer us, an' done the
best they could fer us;
They sure wus mighty useful in the winnin'
o' the West.

NIGHT

TO SUMAS O'SULLIVAN

I did not mind the storm that swept the hills;
The cabin walls were thick, and I was warm,
And the fat stove was glowing orange-bright
With pitch-pine knots — enough to last till morning.
I read my book, and only laughed a bit
When some great-grandfather of mighty winds
Hurled spitting sleet against the window panes.
And rocked the cabin, only curled myself
A little deeper in the padded chair
To shiver comfortably at the sound.

"Whan that Aprille," thus began my book.
It brought a sense of warm spring days to come,
When all the snow-clad hills would gleam again
Resplendent in their mantles of new green,

NIGHT

When I could ride, and ride, careless of trail,
On through a bright, sweet world of living
things,
Of waving grass, and birds, and amber
streams.

But then my dream was shattered into bits,
Because a coyote, starving in the breaks,
Yelled out his hunger song through the black
night.

COULEE DWELLERS

Buried deep where the sage-grown ridges
Lazily down from the bench lands crawl,
Under a strip of blue that bridges,
Hand's breadth wide, from wall to wall,
We toil through each dull, silent day.
But hearts go winging away — away —
South and far where the out-trails beckon,
South where the broad lands call.

Only there is the rim rock broken;
There the valley swings free and wide
Up to the snow-capped Belts, a token
Somewhere lies the world outside.
And we watch each shadow-play, each change
Of light, out there on the sun-flecked range.
Silver-green when the rains caress it,
Gray when the heat waves glide.

Sometimes gay little whirlwinds bicker
To and fro on the valley floor,
Sometimes grumbling storm clouds flicker
Bright with lightning, and the roar

COULEE DWELLERS

Of coming hail is a fearful breath
Threatening all the land with death.
Sometimes only a sea of moonlight
Glimmers from shore to shore.

And life rolls by when across the valley
Floats the dust we have learned to know,
High, thin dust where the sheep bands dally,
Hurrying dust where the swift cars go.
So eyes, hill-weary, turn, to rest
From prisoning walls on eager quest
South to the wide world flung before us,
South to our picture show.

CAMPFIRES

He made his camp where the brown ridge
broke off
Above the creek. Below him, rich with grass
The valley swung away to right and left,
North to the river breaks, a good ten miles,
South to the blue haze of the Little Belts.
And down the shadowed length of it there ran
A dark, meandering scroll of willow brush
That marked sweet water. Water, and wood,
and grass;
And a cool evening breeze just springing up:
A good camp, this.

Half dreaming by the fire
He heard a nighthawk, booming, flutter past.
A trace chain clinked. Somewhere a coyote
yelped —
A pup, he thought. He stirred the little blaze
With outstretched foot, and where his riding
boot
Scratched through the dry thin sward there
lay revealed

CAMPFIRES

A bit of charred stick rotting in the earth.
He wondered, idly curious, and scraped a hole
Almost knee deep, and ever as he dug
He found the traces left by earlier camps;
Burnt shale, wood ashes, fragments of porous
bone.

It spurred his fancy: Bearded men come
west
Beside their oxen—blue-coats—the pioneers;
Before them, Blackfeet, or the Teton Sioux
Strayed north for hunting. Earlier? Who
knows!
Water, and wood, and grass. A hostelry
Old as the land itself.

He spread the fire,
Unrolled his tarp, and bedded for the night.

GIFTS

Cloud shadows floating over sunny fields,
Sweet-clover winds moving the leaves at noon,
Hill trails where sunflowers flaunt their golden
shields,
The glint of waters under a climbing moon,
The twilight music of a nesting wren:
God gave these things to me and other men.

FAINT HEART

I sure did plan to kiss her comin' home, I
ain't denyin' it;
Folks get acquainted plenty at a Circle-
Seven dance.
I sorter thought that Lovell's Ford would be
the place for tryin' it,
An' there I slid up kinder close, all set to
take a chance.

But jest as I wus startin' in a manner most
beguilin'
I got a funny feelin' like there's some one
watchin' me,
An' then I see the yellow moon's all crinkled
up with smilin',
An' heard the crick a-gigglin' jest as plain
as plain could be.

The hills wus holdin' of their breath, already
for to shout at us,
A million stars wus winkin' at each other
up above,

The sagebrush by the trail wus filled with eyes a-peekin' out at us:
It sure seemed dog-gone public for a feller makin' love.

An' so I didn't do it. Well, I guess I'm brave as most folks,
But sometimes good intentions kinder suffer from the chills.
I warn't a-goin' to kiss no girl out front of all them ghost folks,
An' furnish entertainment for the everlastin' hills.

I know I ought to done it, an' I reckon she expected it:
I never got another chance the whole way back to town.
She acted like she thought I seen my duty, but neglected it.
Well, anyhow, she's goin' now with that fresh kid, Joe Brown.

THE MISANTHROPE

A big blue fly went buzzin' in the Dark Horse
Livery door,
An' then come buzzin' out again, an' zig-
zagged on his way;
An' Wes Jones, Prop., he looks at him an'
kinder shakes his head:
"There goes the only customer," says Wes,
"I've had today.

"Some few years back a feller's girl wus
plenty satisfied
With one of my top buggies — an' the
hawse could pick his road.
Three dollars covered all the bills, an' if a man
wus broke
I'd trust him fer a month, 'cause then folks
paid me what they owed.

"Jest look today! Them fellers' sons is hellin'
through the streets
In heathen-painted sportin' cars, that cost
'em, standin' still,

A blame sight more fer upkeep than my best
team ever done
When goin' its gosh-darnedest — an' it's,
'Dad'll pay the bill.'

"The girls that uster kinder watch an' help a
feller save,
They can't go ridin' nowadays in ordinary
clothes;
They gotter have a sealskin coat, that never
seen a seal,
An' imitate some movie queen with powder
on her nose!

"It's sure discouragin'," says Wes; "I'm
tellin' you," says he,
"I'd sell this barn, good-will an' all, fer
eighteen dollars, cash!
There's jest one thing that keeps me up: I'm
only sixty-three
An' orter live to see the whole blame works
go plumb to smash."

THE MIXER

Folks say I've got the knack of makin' friends,
An', speakin' modest-like, it's maybe so.
Without denyin' it I still contends
It ain't no cause fer joy. The men I know
That prospers in these broad and glorious lands
Ain't sufferin' no cramp from shakin' hands.

Jake Smith ain't half so popular as me,
But when we liquidates at George's Place
In close contiguous proximity —
Meanin' together — Jake he screws his face
Into a scowl, an' says he's got a thirst,
An' somehow always gets the bottle first.

An' there's my brother Jim, a little cuss
About as friendly as a rattlesnake;
Seems like he's always stirrin' up some fuss,
An' what he wants he's apt to go an' take.
He got elected sheriff back last fall,
An' no one ever mentioned me a-tall.

THE RANCH

My ol' dad says, when I wus jest a kid
I wus the one my mother liked the best
Of all her family. Perhaps she did —
I wusn't always teasin', like the rest —
But jest because she knew I wouldn't cry
'Twus me she gave the smallest cut of pie.

To tell the truth I'm sick of smilin' round,
It never helped me none, an' never will:
Them folks that think my back wus made to pound,
Them folks that snickers out, "Why, here's ol' Bill!"
I'd swap 'em all, exceptin' two or three,
Fer one good enemy to scrap with me.

LITTLE ROADS

Little roads go wandering out across the broad lands,
Waver through the sagebrush in thin black lines,
Feel their way among the breaks, and fade on the river sands,
Straggle up the rimrock to neighbor with the pines.

And the little roads laugh at the straight-laced highway
Dreary in its pride and its bonds of wire fence:
Each roving saddle trail, wagon track, and byway —
"Come a-gypsying," it calls. "Leave your smug pretense."

And lovers of the little roads find God's hidden places,
Silent plains and valleys where the white stars swing

Over magic lands, rough-hewn with creation's
traces;
Wonderlands He guards for men who go
adventuring.

THE RANGE

Some men can paint in pretty, flowing words
A lovely woman, or a star-lit night,
A high-walled garden gay with singing birds,
The pale emotions, clever and polite:
But who can tell the ardent, yearning pain
Wide sage lands bring when damp with summer rain?

FRIENDS

So young we were in the Horseshoe years,
Jim and Red and Billy and I!
From each bright dawn that swept the sky
Till the hills were gray we had our way
With all life holds of smiles and tears.

And we grew closer than kith or kin
Through long night watches, through lusty
days,
And praise of one was the common praise,
And one man's fight was the common right,
And the sin of one was our common sin.

Yet a wanderer's feet are restless feet,
And a man's own life is an endless quest.
So rough hands strike with a parting jest.
Then never a line, no word nor sign,
Comes back, for the out-trails seldom meet.

But I know, wherever they are tonight,
Red and Billy and Jim still care

That I do well, and wish me fair
When the task seems hard, and the road is
barred:
We four were friends in our youthful might.

A SONNET SEQUENCE

"An' they say three diff'runt men proposed to her at the same dance — Joe Kingsbury, 'n' Sidney Fisher, 'n' Bennie Willis; an' the only reason she took —"

I

Joe Kingsbury

See here, June, I've been thinkin' quite a while
'Bout somethin', an' it sorter seems to me
The time's come round fer talkin' of it. See?
Well, wastin' words ain't never been my style:
I met your dad last week at Seven Mile.
He wants my bluejoint meadow. "I'll agree
On any price you want to set," says he.
"That's June," says I. An' then I seen him smile.
Now — gosh, but this hall's hot — his ranch an' mine
They'd fit together slick. I guess you know
It's been right lonesome fer me since Nell died.
An' honest, June, I sure do like you fine:
You're sensible, you don't care much fer show
Like some girls. Come, let's take a walk outside.

II

SIDNEY FISHER

I'll tell the world you're lookin' swell to-
night
In that pink dress! An' then you've got your
hair
Done different, too. Mean it? Miss June, I
swear
I ain't jest sayin' this to be polite.
I guess I know a pretty girl, all right,
An' you're sure pretty. Say, we'd make a
pair
That folks would talk about. *We'd* make 'em
stare!
You're dark, you know, an' me, I'm kind of
light.
An' both good dressers. Think it over, June.
You know right well I ain't the sort of man
To fool a girl. Seems like I've got a hunch
That you an' me could spend our honey-
moon
In little ol' New York. Ain't that some
plan?
Let's us get married, an' surprise the bunch.

III

BENNIE WILLIS

You know my blue-roan colt, June? Sure you
do.
Right pretty, ain't he? Don't you like the way
He holds his head? Yes *sir*, you've got to say
That there's a hawse! An' he's plumb gentle,
too;
A kid could ride him. Travels jest as true
As any ten-year-old. Sell? Not today!
I broke him for a lady. 'Course, she *may* —
Who is it? Well, it's — dog-gone, June, she's
you!
Aw, come now, take him! Gee, — come on —
say yes.
He ain't worth much — I mean — he's worth
a lot
If you'll jest take him, 'cause I've liked you
so —
Always — since we were kids — I kind of guess
You'd have to take me with him! June,
you've got
To marry me! Aw, please, June, — aw — *you*
know!

THE REALIST

No'm', I don't read poems much no more;
First place, I ain't got time, an' secon' place
I don't know why I should. Them poet fellers,
They're jest plain folks like you an' me, except
They've kinder got the knack o' puttin' things
In better words 'n' what us folks would use.
I never saw no use in settin' down
An' readin' what some other feller thought
A cow was like, when all I had to do
Was jest turn round, to see a dozen of 'em,
An' every one a whole lot better cow
Than he could make for me with all his words.
At least, ma'am, that's the way I sorter feel.

Look down the crick now, right above the bend —
The big ol' cottonwood there, featherin' up
All by itself — now that's the sort o' thing
Them author chaps would make a poem of,
An' when they got through spillin' ink an' words
They'd have a poem, but I'd have the tree;

That's the real poem, an' the one they write
It's jest an imitation. See them hills
That come a-tumblin' down right from the sky?
They're poems too, an' so's the crick itself,
An' — listen jest a minute — hear him sing?
I claim there ain't a poet, live or dead,
To equal Mister Meadowlark for singin'.
Why, ma'am, some mornin's when I first get up
An' feel the air all cool an' sorter sparklin'
Like runnin' water, an' smell the growin' things,
An' hear the birds, it sure does seem to me
Like this whole world is jest made up of poems,
The kind a feller lives with through the day.

O' course, there's folks that have to stay in town,
An' then there's sick folks, an' there's folks so old
They've got to take their poetry from books
Or go without; but speakin' personal,
I ain't a-goin' to take mine secon'-hand
So long as it's a-comin' straight from God.

THE POET

There's one ol' feller always had me scared,
He's Henry Stubbs, First National's cashier;
Skinny, an' buzzard-faced, an' lanky-haired,
With bright, cold eyes, set jest a little near.
His words they sorter edge out through his lips
An' sweat a man down to his finger tips.

But Henry Stubbs don't worry me no more,
I know he's human underneath the skin;
So when ol' Henry gets to actin' sore,
An' talkin' like he'd call the sheriff in,
I wait a while, an' let him fuss an' blow,
An' then I tell him right where he can go.

One Sunday mornin' I wus huntin' strays
Up in the hills beyond the Circle-T,
An' there, by luck, I come to ride a ways
Through that ol' ranch Hen took from Jimmie Fee:

I dunno why; it's too darn rough to plough,
An' busted fences never held a cow.

Sand-rock an' hills, with cut-banks fer a change,
There ain't a house in twenty mile, er more,
But all at once I heard a yell so strange
It shocked me like a spittin' forty-four.
I'll free confess my nerves wus somewhat shook,
But, well, o' course I had to go an' look.

A twistin' cut-bank coulee lay ahead,
An' reckonin' the yellin' come from there
I snuck up, quiet, crouchin' low fer lead
That might come sprayin' careless through the air.
An', peekin' down,— oh gosh, the sight I seen!
'Twus Henry Stubbs, as naked as a bean.

A-ridin' of a bareback hawse he wus,
That chunky bay you see him drive in town,
An', as I watches, what you think he does

But throw his head up, wave his arm, an' frown:
"Death to the white man!" Hen shouts, gives a yell,
Digs in his heels, an' off he goes like hell.

A hundred yards away he stops an' turns,
Comes back kiotin', hangin' down the side,
An', well, to cut the matter short, I learns
Consider'ble from watchin' Henry ride.
An' he sure seems to get a heap o' fun
From playin' Injun in the burnin' sun.

Don't make no diff'rence now when Henry scowls,
Pounds on his desk right business-like, an' swears,
I ain't scared worth a cuss, 'cause all his growls,
An' all his findin' fault with my affairs
I know is bluff, put on so folks won't see
Ol' Henry's jest a poet, same as me.

MAIDEN

It was growing dark in the gulches, for black
clouds buried the sun,
And the bursting thunder echoed like the roar
of a great siege gun,
And I didn't need the chilly wind that swept
through the underbrush
To tell me somebody'd be right wet, and soon,
if he didn't rush.

So I gave free rein to my pony and we followed
a faint old track
That shuttled under the mountain side
through pine and tamarack,
Till all of a sudden we found ourselves, as the
first big drops came down,
In the weed-grown street of Maiden, that
broke gold mining town.

It never was much of a place at best, and now
you'd hardly know
A thousand men had lived there once, not
thirty years ago,

For the board shacks lay in ruins, and only
the log ones stood
With clatter and bang of sagging planks and
smell of rotten wood.

But I kicked aside the tumbleweed that
blocked the Day House door
And stabled Dan in the lobby, where plaster
littered the floor.
Then, scratching a match to find the way, I
made my bed for the night
On top of the rickety, worn oak bar, right
under Custer's Fight.

And the bloody-minded chromo, or the storm,
I don't know which,
Set me thinking of bearded ghosts still dream-
ing of getting rich;
But, though I lay awake and watched till my
aching bones grew numb,
Not a single ghost of the godless crew was
thoughtful enough to come.

Now maybe they all were busy at their own
work, down in the mines,

Or maybe they don't like stormy nights, when
a cold wind whimpers and whines;
Perhaps it's only on holidays, for instance,
Fourth of July,
That the bearded ones breast up to the bar
and lift their glasses high.

But, somehow, I know they come there, and
the whole place rings again
To the shuffling feet of the miners, to the
boastful talk of men,
While Dutch Jake slides the bottle — here —
there — on the swimming oak,
As he used to do in the hopeful days before
the town went broke.

So I'm going back to Maiden next summer,
as sure as fate,
And I certainly ought to see those ghosts, if I
just keep still and wait.
And, well, of course I couldn't refuse if a kind
old spook should think
To pity a bashful stranger's thirst, and ask
him up for a drink.

THE DAY

I laughed with the dawn this morning,
Sang aloud as the bright winds blew,
For the whole long day was before me
And I thought of deeds to do.

But tonight, when the sky is crimson,
I grieve with the weary sun,
Because, of all those noble deeds,
Not a dog-gone deed have I done.

THE VISITOR

My great-great-grandmother, Phipps by
name,
Tiptoed out from her picture frame;
Stepped from the low-boy down to a chair,
Then to the carpet, and curtsied there.

Grandmother's hair was powdered white,
And her shoulders gleamed in the softened
light,
And her ivory fan waved to and fro,
Wafting a perfume of years ago.

"My dear, please don't be afraid," she said,
"There's a baby upstairs in the blue-room
bed:
I've heard him laugh, and I've heard him
fret,
But nobody's brought him to see me yet.

"Why, only this morning I heard them say
He was five months old this very day;

So now, when he's sure to be fast asleep,
Please won't you take me for just one peep?"

I said I was charmed — it was only fair,
And I led the way up the darkened stair.
(Which is rather a shivery thing to do
With a great-great-grandmother following you.)

She knelt by the baby's blanket nest
And she touched his hand to her fair young breast,
And I heard her laugh, as she smoothed the clothes,
"Thank God, he's got the family nose."

Then she tiptoed back the way she came
And settled down in her picture frame.

There's the happiest smile on the canvas lips
Of Great-great-grandmother Charity Phipps!

EVENING

I have ridden in the twilight
When the hills were shot with glory
And the silent coulee slowly
  Filled with shadow to the brim;
When the green-and-gold cathedral
Of the world became a jewel,
And the west, a fire-opal,
  Flamed beyond the farther rim.

I have seen the glory passing
As the plumes of night swept over,
Seen the stars break out in millions
  On a velvet summer sky,
Till the day-soul gave its being
To the splendid, somber darkness,
Merging softly with the night-soul
  In eternal mystery.

THE BADGER HOLE

He didn't try to fool himself: he knew.
Remote, he watched the shining scarlet thread
Creep snakewise in among the bluejoint roots,
And coil in tiny pools that seemed to spread
Each time his throat burned so.

In dull review
He saw the yearling reach the little park
Bordered by willow brush, while down the slope
His white horse pounded half a length behind.
He heard the whistle of the circling rope;
And then — the stunning weight — the flame-lit dark —
Warm sunshine on his face.

His eyes were clear.
Funny he couldn't move! His luck held good:
He'd always sort of hoped to go like this,

Quickly, beneath the sky, as a man should,
And bother no one. Luck was mighty queer!

And a white horse stood waiting.

Afternoon
Grew dim with shadows. Then a silver rain
Of stars came out. And soon a little boy
Drove home with dad down the North Pasture lane
Under low apple trees all bright with June.

THE HAILSTORM

I am the hail! the hail!
Bow to me, bend to me, fear me!
When my yellow war plumes sweep the plain
Tremble, and hear me!

Dull through the hot, still air
Rumbles my challenge, the thunder,
Till the ripe grain reels at my first grim breath,
Fearful of plunder.

Weed-squadrons drive before,
Clearing the way for my coming,
And the sally-ports of the snow-capped range
Roar with my drumming.

Death in my fusillade!
White death on hill and in hollow!
When the trails and the bare fields leap in smoke
Ruin shall follow!

I am the hail! the hail!
Bend to me, bow to me, fear me!
When my yellow war plumes sweep the plain
Tremble, and hear me!

AUGUST

When the afternoon is a lazy hush
  Of summer weather and droning wings
I follow a path through the willow brush
  To a place I know, where a great tree swings
Low branches over a bend in the creek,
And the light and shadows play hide-and-
    seek.

Where the water slips with never a sound
  Out from the willows, deep and cold,
And the white foam blots drift slowly round
  In a sunny cavern of jade and gold.
I crouch and thrill on the wet rock rim,
Then dive straight down for the cooling swim.

In a quick, chill flash of immortal life
  Bright silver-streaming comets fly,
Stars flare and shatter in whirling strife,
  And strange, dark curtains mystify,
Till sudden I feel beneath my hand
The welcome touch of bottom sand.

Then I turn, and reach for the emerald day
  Glinting and wavering overhead.
On my outstretched arms the ripples play
  Cool and soft, when I make my bed
In the sun-flecked water, and watch the sky
Through the leaves, as the afternoon drifts by.

LOSS

Just for a fragment of morning we two were
together;
Trail joined trail in the hills, and we rode to
the west
Chance-met comrades in youth and the upland
weather,
Wasting our priceless minutes in banter and
jest.

Short was the way, but I learned life's song
from her singing,
Learned from her slow, sweet smile, and the
gray of her eyes;
Saw with new vision the clustered yucca bells
swinging,
Thrilled to the beauty of white peaks meet-
ing the skies.

How could I know that the hills would grow
dark with her going?
Laughing, I watched her ride into the south,
and away.

LOSS

Mine was a living gleam of the high gods' bestowing;
Lightly I tossed it aside in the spirit of play.

I should have put aside all things, and made her road my road;
I should have followed her down to the ends of the earth.
Blind, I have wandered the dim trails, missing love's highroad:
She could have led me to honor, and glory, and worth.

Mine was the folly of wisdom, and mine the transgressing;
Only I keep through time's blurring, and treasure for gain,
The grace of a white throat, formed for a man's caressing,
Brown hair, and a girl's wrist bent to the bridle rein.

THE INDIAN

I found him crouching in the gray March
snow,
High on the valley's rim, so motionless,
So like the sagebrush, that I passed him by
Without a thought; but when his huddled
form
Showed strange against the yellow western
light
I turned my horse, and climbed the trail again.

He never moved his head as I came near;
He made no sound in answer when I spoke;
And when I offered him a cigarette
A grimy claw shot out, and clutched it in
Without a sign of thanks. And then once more
He squatted motionless, his steady gaze
Fixed on the valley. There I saw his camp,
A single tepee in the willow brush,
Two ponies tethered to a wagon wheel,
And hungry-looking dogs innumerable.
But no smoke curled above the tepee top,
And no squaw drove the prowling dogs away.

THE INDIAN

A mangy buffalo hide, drawn close about him,
Hid all except his withered face, and there
Hot suns and winter winds had graved their runes,
Checked and cross-checked it, like the weathered bark
Of an old cottonwood, and in the eyes
Brooding upon the valley was no light
But the dead gleam of perfect misery.
And suddenly I knew the cold, dead eyes
Were seeking things they could not hope to see;
Trying to blot away the section fence
That cuts across the bottom, striving hard
To bring the saddest dream that ever comes,
The hopeless dream that mocks eternity
With scenes and faces of another day.

Was it a teeming village that he sought,
Down in the valley bottom on the snow?
A thousand lodges, bright with many fires,
Crowded with life, ponies, and dogs, and men,
Children, and bead-decked women, laughter and song,
And all the glad confusion of the dusk

When the Great Spirit ruled, and life was
good?
Or did his dry old sinews thrill again,
Gripping a wet back with his naked thigh,
As all the savage chase swept clamorous
About the dark herd, thundering toward the
hills,
While a crazed pony bore him shouting in
Where dust was thickest, and the killing red?

He crouched and dreamed, drawing the
mangy robe
Tighter about him; and because I knew
The land I held by law was his by love
I gave him all the cigarettes I had,
And came away, and in my heart was pain.

CHIEF LAME-BEAR SINGS

Why is the sunlight cold when it falls in the
south-open door of my tepee?
Why are the nights so long? Why do the
wind-children wail so drearily?
Why have the hills grown gray and dead in the
flush of the springtime?
O thou Great Spirit, tell me, for I would
know!

Where are the buffalo? The grass grows rank
and high in their dusting-places.
Where are the war chiefs? A badger is digging
his den by the grave of my brother.
Where is the woman whose laugh I hear in
the dreams of twilight?
O thou Great Spirit, tell me, for I would
know!

I am an old man, torn by the hungry teeth of
the summers and winters;
I am an old man, singing and playing the fool
for a stranger people;

I am an old man, sick for the sight of the face of my mother.

Take me, O thou Great Spirit, for I would go!

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THE RANCH

ELLIOTT C. LINCOLN

Poems of the Northwest by the author of "Rhymes of a Homesteader"